1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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History

Kanem-Bornu: The Historical Background

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THIS BOOK is primarily an account of the way of life of a contemporary African people. However this particular group, unlike many others in Africa or elsewhere, has an ancient and well-documented history. The fact that such materials are available also means that we can observe the kingdom as it developed through time and obtain some appreciation for its continuity and change as one of the oldest political powers in Africa. I have therefore tried to bring together in summary form an account of Bornu history and its political development during the last millenium of southern Saharan history. In terms of the overall ethnolgraphic task it is important to realize that it is within this historical stream that the contemporary way of life has come to be what it is. Indeed one of the most salient facts about Kanuri culture is the pride the people feel in their history; they believe that one cannot know them unless there is at the same time some understanding of their past. In order to do this I have written first an outline of the major events of this history, then analyzed the political development of the kingdom as it evolved through time. The details of the present political system are then taken up again in Chapter 6.

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Kanuri legends all take the Bornu kingdom back to the north and northeast of Lake Chad to the ancient kingdom of Kanem and before that to Yemen. Like many peoples of West Africa as far removed from one another as the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Fulani of Futa Djallon in Guinea, Kanuri traditions suggest that they as a people come originally from Yemen. It is said that a migrant Yemenite noble named Sef founded the royal dynasty of the Magumi Sefuwa. There is very little doubt that the ancient dynasty of the Sefuwa has been in fact the ruling line in Kanem-Bornu for over a thousand years. However, there is very little evidence except for the legend itself to support the theory that the Kanuri or their ancient leaders originate in Yemen.

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The problem of studying human origins scientifically is a fascinating one, but there are many pitfalls and a keen taste for skepticism is a primary requirement. The rules of the game are, however, quite easy. Simply ask what valid facts